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Ron Russell: Adult education's demise

By RON RUSSELL

Guest commentary

Posted: 03/26/2010 01:32:55 AM PDT

Updated: 03/26/2010 01:32:55 AM PDT

If you think English is a dying language in California, just wait until the last adult education program closes its doors.

Here's the scoop on our state's latest naughty secret. One by one, adult education programs are being eliminated and thousands of adult education teachers, administrators and students anguish as their schools close.

With the focus inevitably on K-12, most people are unfamiliar with the scope, breadth or importance of adult education, so the enrollment numbers might stun some folks: Salinas serves 21,000 students, while Monterey's programs served more than 6,000 last year. Los Angeles caters to tens of thousands.

Locally, Castroville, King City, Greenfield and others have completely closed. Cuts cost Watsonville/Aptos Adult Education over 2,000 students. Salinas, Pacific Grove and Monterey have taken cataclysmic cuts, with additional parsing looming. On March 12, every teacher in Monterey Adult Education, including some who have taught there for 30 years, received pink slips.

Why? Because some recent legal chicanery allows districts to sweep the entire adult education budget into the K-12 kitty.

Historically, this was illegal, as the funding for each was always completely divided. Owing to this sleight of hand, the adult education's budget, now flowing into the general fund, becomes the perfect example of mugging Peter to pay Paul, both of whom may soon be limping off tearfully to bankruptcy court.

Now adult education is

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bestowed an "allowance," which the districts alone determine appropriate, even to the extent of charging them hundreds of thousands of dollars to rent their existing school sites.

All of this is occurring with scant warning or consideration for the teachers, administrators and staff who have dedicated their lives to adult education or for the students who have invested time and money in the programs, which often seem to be their only hope for upward mobility. Today, they are left to flounder while the most effective institution they have to learn our language and culture is shuttered.

Paradoxically—owing to the recession and high unemployment—adult education enrollment was increasing, just as many classes or entire programs were decimated.

With a demanding open-door policy in effect since its inception, adult education, unlike K-12, must be truly self-supporting—rather like working on commission. If teachers can't keep their classes full and can't generate enough attendance money to pay the bills, they lose their jobs. To keep classes packed with up to 50 pupils year after year, these teachers have to really dazzle, retain and satisfy students. Adult education has no captive audiences.

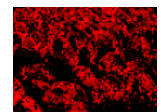
How does this impact the public? How often have you left a business or hung up the phone and said, "My God, that employee couldn't speak a word of English"?

Don't kid yourself. Most of those immigrants struggle sincerely to learn English, but it is almost impossible when adult education is deemed as disposable as Kleenex.

Aside from the mind-numbing myopia of closing the only affordable and effective schools for learning English as a second language, many other singular classes, such as career technology, GED, basic skills, vocational and parenting classes, as well as programs for the aged and Alzheimer patients, may soon be latched and defunct.

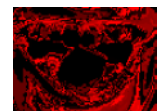
Don't expect the community colleges to assume the burden. They were rightfully designed not to do the remediation work that adult education shoulders.

Fortunately, though undergoing brutal curtailment, Monterey's Adult Education program seemingly has the support of the board of education and Superintendent Marilyn Shepherd, who have promised not to close the



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programs entirely. Kindly remind them that their deeds must match their promises. To voice support: 645-1203 or mshepherd@mpusd.k12.ca.us.

Ron Russell, who lives in Pacific Grove, teaches the American language course at the Naval Postgraduate School through Monterey Adult Education.

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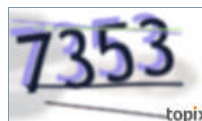
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